

Persian Economic History

Contents

Part I : Economic Innovations

Part II : Trade

Part I : Persian Economic Innovations

Overview The Empires of Ancient Persia were active for a millennium, from 558 B.C.E.-651 C.E., and comprised four distinct dynastic rules. With the invasion of Islamic forces in the 7th century C.E., the sway of ancient Persia was broken, but the legacy of the Persian Empire remains to this day. Centuries of relative peace, in the Mideast and central Asia, can be attributed to the largely peaceful and harmoniously diverse realms of the Persian Empire. Art and architecture flourished, leaving distinct legacies of beauty and form, and the arts of medicine, to segue into our topic of innovation, were given a lasting boost by the ancient Persian achievement.

The arts of medicine One wants to begin at this point, for medical art--while both a science and in this case an 'innovation,' lies at a clearly innovative tipping point in cultural development. Persian historians of their own medical craft divide the national medical achievement into three stages. The *first* is the stages outlined in the *Avesta*, or sacred text of Zoroastrianism, and comprises *surgery, herbs, and divine words*. Of these three medical approaches, claims the *Avesta*, divine words are the most important healing agent, for they go straight to the root cause of disease. (However, we have record of a successful Persian craniotomy from the 3rd century B.C.E.) The second is the stage memorialized in the mediaeval Persian text, *Denkard*, which records ancient Persian medical achievements, and lists *4333 distinct diseases*, an innovation in comprehensiveness. The *third* stage of ancient Persian medical innovation is the intense development of medical training, doctors, and a hospital system, under the particular impulse of the Achaemenid ruler, Darius (521 B.C.E.-486 B.C.E. The world's first teaching hospital--so goes the ancient claim--was founded in Gondishapur, which, by the 6th century C.E. had, it is claimed, become the ancient world's most advanced medical center.

Social policy innovations We have reason to attribute to the sixth century Achaemenid rulers, Cyrus (610-530 B.C.E.) and Darius (521-486 B.C.E.), enlightened social policies which were (allegedly) firsts for mankind. On a cylinder seal, seemingly recording an edict of Cyrus, we read of royal decisions protective of what we would call both human and migrant rights. We also read, from the same source, reference to an act which (seemingly) abolishes slavery in Persia.

Mail system innovation The Persian Royal Road greatly facilitated the spread of news and information in Persia--the internet of its time. Profiting from this new infrastructural facility, and from numerous additional transnational roads constructed in 6th century B.C.E. Persia, Cyrus instituted a postal system intended, according at least to the Greek writer and contemporary Xenophon, to provide mail service to every citizen. A first for mankind!

Carpets The 5th century B.C.E. Pazyryk carpet, excavated from the grave of a Scythian nobleman, in Siberia, was arguably of Achaemenid Persian make, and--still splendid in color and pile--represents (probably) the oldest preserved carpet in the world. Persian carpet artistry has from the outset, to our times, innovated in carpet making techniques and styles.

Readings

Elgood, C., *A Medical History of Persia and the Eastern Caliphate*, Cambridge, 1951.

Ansari, Ali M., *Iran: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 2014.

Discussion questions

Do you see a coherence among the diverse innovations alluded to above? Is there a common 'civilizing' or 'civilized' theme?

How do you explain the special prominence of the ancient Persians in the arts of medicine? Did they pick up their impulse from Egypt, where medical schools and trained physicians were in evidence long before the Persian Empire?

Could we have added tax and tax collection policy to our list of Persian innovations? Were the Persians, with their satrapy system of national administration, breaking fresh ground in the always crucial struggle of the governing folks, to collect taxes?

Part II : Persian Trade

Overview The Persian Empire lasted from 558 B.C.E. to 651 C.E., passing through several major phases--the Achaemenid Dynasty (558 B.C.E.-330 B.C.E.), the invasion of and conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great (334-330 B.C.E.), the Seleucid Dynasty (323 B.C.E.-83 B.C.E.), the Parthian Dynasty (247 B.C.E.-224 C.E.), and the Sassanid Dynasty (224 C.E.-651 C.E.). During this millennium, in the early part of which the Persians suffered humiliating defeat at the hands of the Greeks, the Persians accrued one of the largest and most civilized empires of antiquity. From 558 B.C.E.-486 B.C.E. the Persians were blessed with two on the whole outstanding and forward looking monarchs, Cyrus (600 B.C.E.-530 B.C.E.) and Darius (521 B.C.E.-486 B.C.E.) At the time of his monarchy, Cyrus ruled over the most extensive empire ever seen by mankind. Within the framework of this powerful and influential empire, international trade gained momentum, and contributed to the coming together of formerly separate areas of human settlement, from China to Western Europe.

Transportation: the Royal Road Great Empires--Roman, Chinese--depend on a strong transportation network, along which information can pass that provides the backbone basis for a trading society. No network better illustrates this reliance of trade on information than the 1600 mile long Royal Road which the Persian Emperor Darius (521 B.C.E.-486 B.C.E.) sponsored into existence, between Sardis and Susa. In the Persian empire this transportation vehicle served as the beating artery of progress and power. Trade between diverse parts of the empire--facilitated by large business agencies and commercial houses-- and en route to export points, was greatly facilitated by this inland route, which Royal messengers on horse could traverse in nine days, and which--as the complexity of the Empire grew-- spawned an industry of caravanserais where travelers could stay as they made their ways from one end of Persia to the other, and where goods could be warehoused. Ongoing networks of roads, like the Chinese Silk Road, joined the Persian Royal Road to help form a land transportation web which stretched from India to Egypt, connecting major seaports which served as access points for goods transfer.

Ocean trade The Persians were proficient sailors, particularly active in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea; points for goods delivery and for forward merchanting to more distant ports such as those in China and India. In large cargo vessels, taking advantage of trade winds in such bodies of water as the Indian Ocean, the Persians were able to deliver and sell with ever increasing efficiency, as their empire grew and its tentacles spread. Among the most valued commodities of the Persian merchant trade were the wide varieties of fruits and vegetables which the inland soil of Persia cultivated, and which have left their names in our present-day vocabulary: *orange*, *lemon*, *peach*, *asparagus*, *spinach*; not to mention those Persian items of dress, *tiara*, *shawl*, *sash*, which were attractive to foreign style setters. In addition to such civilizing items, for which Persia was renowned, there was export of precious metals--abundant in Persia--and stock for new crops--like sesame, imported to Egypt, or rice to Mesopotamia.

Coinage and commerce An accurate system of weights and measures, a homogeneous and plentiful coinage supply, and the development of banking and commercial houses, within Persia, all contributed to the increase of trade within the Persian Empire. The principle at work in the development of economies of scale was active in the development of the Persian Empire which, the more coherent and internally self-informed it was, the more profitable it was able to render its enterprises.

Reading

Cook, J. M., *The Persian Empire*, London, 1983.

Lockard, Craig, *Societies, Networks, and Transitions: A Global History*, Boston, 2008.

Discussion questions

How were commercial relations between Persia and Greece influenced by the 'Persian Wars,' as the Greeks called them? Did commerce--as usual--trump international hostility?

Ships were the key to Persian trade. Where were these ships made? Who made them? Were the Persian triremes similar to the Greek triremes used in the Persian Wars?

How were the Royal Road--and the many other land networks in Persia--financed? Was it by the famed Persian tax system, or by the 5000 tons of silver on reserve in the King's treasury?